

Residents wary of gangs' appeal to county youth

■ Panel discussion focuses on parenting, after-school programs and role models

BY JASON TOMASSINI
STAFF WRITER

Residents worried about the growing number of gang-related crimes questioned county officials on parenting, after-school programs and the ability of schools to provide positive role models for at-risk youth during a panel discussion Monday at Wheaton Library.

The discussion on issues facing young people followed an April 9 incident at Albert Einstein High School in Kensington where police allege that students with gang ties attempted to sell firearms inside the building. One of those guns went off inside a bathroom, but no one was hurt.

* Many of the roughly 60 people in attendance at the event, sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Montgomery

County, were concerned about gang-related issues facing teens.

Gary Lattanzio, a longtime Wheaton resident who teaches an after-school martial arts program to elementary and middle school students, said law enforcement focuses on older children that are already too involved with gangs to be helped.

"Through my experiences with children, you don't get them young enough," he said. "By the time they are 14, they have already been taken over."

The target age for gang members is 14 to 24, Montgomery County Police Chief J. Thomas Manger said, and they are recruited either within their neighborhood or within their ethnic group. He said the level of support from the community and parents can be a key factor in whether youths turn to gangs.

"I'm guessing 95 percent of [gang members] did not have adult or parental influence in their lives, the way it should be,"

he said. "... If we don't provide that for our kids, our gangs will."

Manger was part of a panel that spoke briefly to the audience and then took questions. Capt. David Gillespie, director of the special investigations unit for county police, County Council member Phillip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg and Chuck Carter of County Executive Isiah Leggett's office were also on the panel.

Gillespie said Montgomery County has about 1,195 gang members in an estimated 36 to 40 gangs. A summary of crime data from county police shows that gang-related crimes increased from 243 in 2006 to 330 last year.

And while gang crime represents less than 1 percent of county crime, Andrews said it is a big problem for certain communities.

"[Gang crime] has a larger impact than just its numbers," he said. "It has an impact on quality of life, people's perception, safety, on the general sense of neighborhoods."

Despite the low percentage of gang crime, Manger said neighborhoods in Aspen Hill along Bel Pre Road, Langley Park and certain areas in Wheaton and Germantown had a high concentration of gang activity.

One Wheaton resident who requested anonymity said her 13-year-old son, who attends Newport Mill Middle School in Kensington, has been recruited by high school students at Einstein. She said her son used to participate in sports and after-school programs but now "doesn't want to do anything" because he finds a greater feeling of acceptance with peers.

Kathy McGuire, a Kensington resident and former elementary school teacher, said there must be a constant effort to guide at-risk children throughout the entirety of their education, while also reaching out to those who are pushed out of the school system.

"In elementary school, you have kids working on bullying,"

she said. "In middle school, there's peer pressure and the peers are more important than the parents."

Panel members touted the importance of offering alternatives to gang activity. Groups like the Gaithersburg-based Identity, which offers after-school services, recreational activities and parent education services geared toward the county's Latino population, were mentioned as options. Carter said the county had developed "community-based collaboratives" in Long Branch in Silver Spring, Bel Pre Road in the Aspen Hill/Wheaton area and Gunners Branch in Germantown, to bring together community members of all ages to discuss gang issues.

Andrews said last year's expansion of RecExtra, an after-school program now offered at all middle schools, would hopefully help reach students at a crucial age.

"Middle school is the turning point, where kids are going in terms of peer pressure and are supervised less often," he said, adding that middle school has been "the neglected part of the school system."